Growing veg, fruit and herbs made easy

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Welcome

Whether you're new to growing your own vegetables, fruit and herbs, have some experience or just want to find out more, we hope you find this guide useful.

Growing your own has loads of benefits – it saves you money, involves no food miles, reconnects you to the seasons and means you can eat organically. And, of course, it's incredibly satisfying. It's no surprise that these days, veg seeds easily outsell flowers.

In this guide, we've picked some of the easiest and most popular vegetables, fruit and herbs to grow – many of them suitable for containers. Over the years, our experts have tested everything from growing potatoes in pots to finding the tastiest strawberries, and, because this guide is from Which?, it's full of clear, no-nonsense advice. Happy growing!

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Getting started

All you need to get growing is some soil, some seeds (or young plants), a sunny spot and a plan of action

So, you've decided that you'd like to grow some veg, soft fruit and herbs. Congratulations!

The first thing to do is to decide where to grow your crops. If you want to grow a serious amount, a veg plot is the best option. But if you haven't got room, most of the plants in this guide can be grown in raised beds or mixed in with flower borders.

Alternatively, you can grow veg, smaller soft fruit and herbs in pots on the patio.

Wherever you decide to grow your produce, a sunny spot is essential – only a few crops will grow in a shaded position.

Decide what to grow

Our advice is to grow the produce you enjoy eating. Consider some expensive seasonal treats, such as new potatoes and strawberries. Alternatively, focus on produce that's easier to produce – all the vegetables, fruit and herbs mentioned in this guide are popular and easy to grow.

Research each crop and see how much space it needs. Some crops, such as courgettes, can take up a lot of room so may not be suitable if you've got a small plot. Other crops, like tomatoes, grow well in pots.

Prepare your soil

If you're starting a new plot or making raised beds, you'll need to prepare the ground thoroughly. Digging breaks up compacted soil, improving drainage and aeration. At the same time as digging, you can remove perennial weed roots and dig in some bulky organic matter (such as garden compost or well-rotted farmyard manure).

Get your soil tested

Vegetables grow fast compared with other plants. Garden soil contains most of the nutrients they need, but if in doubt, it's worth getting your soil tested. This will tell you if any nutrients are in short supply and determine its pH, which can affect the ability of plants to absorb nutrients.

Feed plants in pots

Crops in pots will definitely need regular feeding. Vigorous, leafy crops such as lettuces will need a balanced liquid fertiliser that contains equal proportions of nitrogen, phosphate and potash. Fruiting crops, for example tomatoes, will need a liquid feed; this contains potash to encourage flowers (and therefore fruits).

Tip

Don't fancy growing your crops from seed? Look out for small vegetable plants at the garden centre that you can plant straight away.

Mulch

Spreading organic matter on the surface of the soil (in a layer at least 5cm thick) in early spring (March) will prevent weed seeds germinating and will help retain moisture, too. In time, earthworms will drag it down into the soil, so you don't need to dig it in.

Create beds

If you divide your plot into beds or make raised beds, the soil is less likely to become compacted and you won't need to dig. Light cultivation, such as hoeing and raking, is all you'll need to do.

Growing plants in pots

- Grow one type of vegetable per container unless you're growing herbs. Different types grow at different rates.
- For herbs, use pots of at least 2 litres. Use 10-litre pots or bigger for vegetables.
- Ensure the bottom of the pot has drainage holes. Cover the base of the container with a layer of broken polystyrene or gravel to aid drainage.
- Use a multi-purpose compost or the contents of a growing bag (tip the contents into a container for ease).
- Water your pots frequently in summer when the weather warms up.
- After about four weeks, feed your leafy crops with a liquid fertiliser; fruiting crops, such as tomatoes, will need a high-potash feed.

Salad leaves

Lettuces and rocket can be ready in as little as a month – keep sowing them for a constant supply

Lettuces will grow pretty much anywhere as long as you water them frequently. They're ideal for pots and window boxes. Home-grown lettuces taste great and there's a huge range to choose from. We recommend: 'Little Gem', a small cos, 'Lettony', a green loose-leaved type, and 'Mazurosso', a red loose-leaved variety.

How to grow

- Lettuce seedlings are vulnerable to soil rot and pests such as slugs, snails and rabbits. Start the seeds off in small pots or seed trays. Plant into their final position when they're 5cm tall.
- Treat the soil with the biological control Nemaslug (see page 22) before you plant, or apply organic slug pellets sparingly.
- Sow small numbers fortnightly from April to July so you have a succession of mature plants for eating. In high summer, lettuce seeds may not germinate if the temperature is over 20°C, so sow them in late afternoon when it's cooler.
- Watch out for aphids. The best way to keep lettuce clean without using insecticide is to cover with fine mesh, such as Enviromesh Ultra Fine, when you sow or plant out. In high summer, pick leaves as soon as they're ready, otherwise they'll 'bolt' (produce flowers) and the leaves will become tough.

Rocket

Wild rocket has a peppery taste and is slow-growing, with small, frilly leaves.

Cultivated (or 'salad') rocket is fast-growing, with larger leaves. It has a spicy flavour and is milder than wild rocket. You can pick it over a period of time, so you don't have to worry about eating it quickly before it goes soggy in the bag.

Varieties

We recommend 'Skyrocket' – a sweet, spicy salad rocket with soft, rounded leaves, and 'Voyager' – a hot and spicy wild rocket.

How to grow

- It's best to grow rocket in pots containing multi-purpose compost. In our trial, pots 25cm wide produced at least 150g of rocket.
- Sow one seed every 2cm or so, cover with a dusting of compost and keep well watered.
- Snip off the leaves when they're 7cm long. After 4–6 weeks, you should get a second harvest.
- Watch out for flea beetle as the weather warms up from late June. Cover plants with mesh to prevent damage (see page 22).

Tip

It is possible to grow delicious salad throughout the winter. Mizuna, mustard 'Red Frills' and pak choi 'China Choi' are just some of the salad leaves that grew well in our trial.

Peas and beans

It doesn't take many seeds to produce bumper crops

Fresh peas and beans are a real treat, especially mangetout (with flat pods) and broad beans eaten whole in the pod (just as you would do with mangetout). Runner beans are the quintessential British garden crop and are regarded as a novelty by the rest of the world. Pea and bean seeds are big, so they're easy to sow.

Varieties

Peas: we recommend 'Ambassador' for shelling peas, 'Carouby de Maussane' and 'Oregon Sugar Pod' for mangetout, and 'Delikett' for sugar snap peas. Broad beans: we recommend 'De Monica' and 'Karmazyn'. If you want to try eating the whole pod, go for 'Listra' or 'Optica'. Runner and French beans: we recommend 'Firestorm', 'White Lady' and 'Moonlight' for runner beans. 'Cobra' and 'Fasold' are good for climbing French beans.

How to grow

- Peas: sow outdoors from February (under a cloche or mesh) to May and again in July for an autumn crop. Make a 2cm-deep trough about 10cm wide and scatter the seeds roughly 5cm apart. Cover with soil and keep moist. If supports are needed, put twigs or plastic pea netting strung between posts in place before seedlings appear.
- Broad beans: start the seeds off in pots or modules in October or November (for an earlier crop) or February and transplant them into the ground after 3 weeks. Use posts and string to keep them upright.
- Runner and French beans: put 2.4m-tall garden canes in place before sowing – make a teepee with a base of about 60cm in diameter. Sow seeds in May or June, 15cm apart, giving each plant a cane to climb up.

Tip

Broad beans are a magnet for blackfly, which can stunt growth if present in large numbers. They can also spread viruses. Try pinching out any growing tips that have colonies of blackfly on them to prevent them spreading. Alternatively, squash the blackfly by hand (wear gloves for this!).

Courgettes

Two plants will keep a family in courgettes all summer!

Courgettes are easy to grow. They're a prolific crop – each plant should produce up to 30 fruits from late June to early September. Just two plants will produce plenty of delicious courgettes all summer long.

They need plenty of room, but we've also had success growing them in 20-litre pots. If you don't pick courgettes frequently in summer, they'll turn into marrows in the blink of an eye!

Varieties

We recommend 'Defender', 'Tuscany' and 'Atena' (a yellow variety).

How to grow

- Sow seeds in 8cm pots indoors at the end of April. Plant outside at the end of May/early June.
- Acclimatise seedlings to the outdoors before planting (bring them indoors overnight at first).
- Dig a hole 30cm deep and wide, and mix in a generous amount of garden compost as you refill it. Give each plant an area of at least 75cm in diameter.

- Keep the soil around plants moist, especially in hot weather.
- Pick your courgettes when they reach 15cm long.

Tip

If you only want a few plants, buy them from a garden centre instead of growing them from seed.

Beetroot

Just sow the seeds; this veg hardly even needs watering

Beetroot is ideal for a small garden as it doesn't take up much space, and is perfect for growing in containers and pots. You can use both the leaves and the actual vegetable. Young beetroot leaves can be used in salads and the older leaves can be cooked like spinach. You can harvest beetroot when it's golf ball sized or leave it in the ground until you need it.

Varieties

We recommend 'Boltardy', 'Pablo' and 'Kestrel'. Or there's the old Italian variety 'Chioggia', with pink and white internal rings.

How to grow

- Sow beetroot as early as February under cloches and outside in March in mild areas, but it's best to wait until April in most parts of the country. You can carry on sowing up until July.
- Sow the large, corky seeds (actually clumps of 4–6 seeds) 5cm apart, in rows 30cm apart. Cover with soil and water well.
- Several seedlings will emerge from each 'seed', but don't worry about thinning them out as they'll grow and push apart.
- The roots grow partly above the soil, so it's easy to see when they have reached baby beet (golf ball) size.

Tip

Don't overwater beetroot as it will produce more leaves than roots.

Use young beetroot leaves in salads, and cook older leaves like spinach

Potatoes

Grow your own spuds for the best flavour

Potatoes really are easy to grow – you simply plant one tuber and a couple of months later, you dig up lots of them!

Blight disease can strike in warm, damp summers – if it's a problem in your area, grow 'first early' varieties, which should be out of the ground by the time it strikes. Or grow resistant varieties such as 'Sarpo Mira'.

There are three types of potato – so why not grow a crop of each? First earlies start to produce tubers in June, just when 'Jersey Royals' command a premium in the shops. Second earlies follow on for harvesting as you need them throughout July and August. They include the waxy salad varieties that are good boiled and served hot or cold. Maincrops are usually left until early autumn and dug up in one go to store through the winter.

Varieties

First earlies: 'Casablanca' and 'Lady Christl' are both reliable and tasty. Second earlies: as a waxy salad potato, 'Charlotte' still takes some beating. Also try 'Anya', a cross between 'Desiree' and 'Pink Fir Apple'. Maincrops: for taste and the best roast potatoes, try 'Cara', 'Apache' or 'Desiree'.

How to grow

- Potatoes are grown from 'seed potatoes', which are tubers produced under disease-free conditions. They are in garden centres from January. 'Chit' the tubers (make them produce sprouts) in a cool, light place before planting.
- Plant early varieties in early April and maincrops in late April. Plant the seed tubers 40cm apart and 15cm deep, using a trowel, in rows that are 50cm apart (for earlies) and 75cm apart (for maincrops).
- Earthing up (drawing earth from either side into a low ridge), helps to protect young shoots and increase the yield. Do this weekly until you have a rounded ridge about 30cm high and wide.

Tip

To store maincrop potatoes, dig them up in October. Cut the foliage off a fortnight before harvesting. Early varieties are best eaten fresh, as they won't store for long.

Pumpkins

Kids will love growing and carving these for Halloween

If you have kids who love Halloween, a pumpkin or two is essential. They grow fast and trail along the ground, and you'll need to give them plenty of room – at least 1.5m each.

Varieties

'Mars' is a baby pumpkin that produces bright orange fruits suitable for carving. 'Racer' is another bright orange variety with a seed cavity deep enough for a large candle.

How to grow

- In April, sow the seeds indoors in pots, as for courgettes (see page 8). The seeds are large, the seedlings huge.
- Plant them out once there's no risk of frost. Protect the young plants from cold nights and wind using fleece until well established.
- Space plants 1m apart each way, marked with a cane. They can spread in all directions.
- You shouldn't need to water them except in very dry summers, when a couple of good soakings around the original planting position should increase the number and size of the fruits.
- Leave fruits to ripen fully in the sun. Before the autumn frosts, lift them, taking care not to damage the stalk. Stand the fruits during the day in a sunny, sheltered spot or in the greenhouse, to finish ripening the skins. Then store in a cool, dry place.

Onions and garlic

Add a home-grown zing to cooking

Onions

You can grow onions from seed in February, but the simplest way is to grow them from 'sets' (partially grown onions).

Shallots

Unlike onions, every shallot set you plant divides into a clump of up to 12 similar-sized shallots. Magic! They're more expensive to buy but have a sweeter taste. We like 'Topper'.

How to grow

- Plant sets straight into the soil in March or April.
- Push the sets in gently so the tips are just covered. Protect with fleece if birds start to pull them out. Space rows 15–30cm apart and plants 5cm apart.
- Only water onions if the weather is exceptionally dry.
- Let the tops dry and fall over naturally. In August, when skins are firm and papery, lift the bulbs gently with a fork and lay them on the soil to bake in the sun. In wet weather, ripen them in a sunny spot under cover.
- Store in a cool, dry place; plait into strings and hang, or place single layers in wooden trays.

Garlic

This is remarkably easy to grow from individual cloves. Don't use supermarket garlic – buy it from a garden centre.

How to grow

- Plant in the soil in November if you live in the south and have free-draining soil; otherwise, wait until January or February.
- Split the bulbs into individual cloves just before planting. Space them about 15cm apart.

- Use a trowel to ease them into the soil (don't push them) and make sure the tops are buried so birds don't pull them out.
- Harvest and store in July.

Onion and garlic varieties

We recommend 'Solent Wight' for garlic. If you're growing onions, 'Red Baron' is a good red variety. 'Autumn Gold', 'Centurion' and 'Turbo' produce solid brown onions that store well.

Tip

The flower shoots or 'scapes' of some garlic varieties are regarded as a gourmet treat in some cuisines. Cut them when young and tender, and use them in any recipe that requires garlic.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes straight off the plant are a real late-summer treat

Tomatoes are easy to grow from seed but, unless you want lots of the same variety, it's even easier to buy young plants from the garden centre in early June.

How to grow

- If growing them from seed, start tomatoes off at a temperature of 20°C in a heated propagator or a well-lit place indoors during March or April. Sow several tomato seeds in a 7cm pot.
- When the seedlings are large enough, tease them apart. Pot them into individual 7cm pots. Keep them somewhere reasonably warm (about 15°C). As the roots start to fill the pots, move them into bigger ones.
- Plant them outside in early June straight into the soil, in growbags or in 10-litre pots in a sheltered spot outdoors.

Water plants regularly by giving the soil a thorough soaking once or twice a week in dry spells. Apply a liquid tomato fertiliser every week or so for the developing fruits.

Tip

As cordon plants grow, pinch out any shoots that appear where the leaves join the main shoot. Pinch out the growing tip in late July to stop it growing upwards and to encourage the fruits that have already formed to ripen.

Training and care

The easiest option is to go for 'bush' varieties, which don't need training. A dwarf bush variety is best. 'Cordon' varieties keep growing through the summer and are best limited to one shoot tied to a support.

Space plants 45cm apart and provide each with a stout stake at least 1.5m tall. Spiral plant supports are an easier alternative which support the plant without any tying. Or you can erect a frame (like a short runner bean frame).

Varieties

'Red Alert' is a dwarf bush that gives an early crop. For cherry tomatoes, 'Gardener's Delight' is an old favourite – train it as a cordon. For larger fruits, try 'Matina' or 'Sacher'.

Avoid blight

Tomatoes, like potatoes, are susceptible to blight, which can rot the tomatoes as they grow on the plant. If blight is a problem in your area, go for an early bush variety such as 'Red Alert', or try 'Losetto'. Keep the foliage dry at all times (growing plants in a greenhouse will help with this) and give the plants plenty of space to help reduce humidity among the foliage.

Rhubarb

Sweet, succulent stems that grow super-fast in spring

Rhubarb is unique in that it's a vegetable (a leaf stalk) that's most often used in desserts – you can even dip the stalks in sugar and eat them raw. It's also a herbaceous perennial, dying down in autumn only to bounce back with incredible vigour in the spring. And it can be forced to produce sweeter and more succulent sticks. For the best flavour, it's worth investing in a named variety of rhubarb, as it will give you years of eating.

Varieties

We recommend 'Valentine' for good taste and looks, and 'The Sutton' for its sweet flavour. 'Livingstone' is a good autumn cropper and 'Timperley Early' is the best for forcing.

How to grow

- The best time to plant rhubarb crowns is in November to December when they are dormant, but you can wait until spring.
- Rhubarb does best in a sunny spot with rich, moist soil that doesn't get waterlogged. Give it at least 1m to spread and dig in plenty of manure or compost. Don't pick in the first year after planting. Mulch in the autumn.

Get an even earlier crop by covering the clump with a terracotta forcing pot or a plastic dustbin in January. The rhubarb crowns need a cold period followed by a frost-free period in the dark to produce a good flush of pale, succulent stalks.

- Harvest your rhubarb from April onwards. Pull the stalks rather than cut them. Make sure you leave three or four strong stems and keep pulling the young tender ones. Stop picking in late June.

? Tip

Propagate large clumps by chopping off younger pieces from the outside with a spade. Pieces with a couple of healthy buds should produce a vigorous new clump in no time.

> From April onwards, pull the stalks rather than cut them. Discard the leaves, as they are poisonous

Strawberries

Red juicy fruits that can continue to crop all summer

Most conventional strawberry plants are propagated from runners and sold as bare-rooted plants. But to grow lots of small-fruited wild or alpine strawberries, the best method is to grow them from seed. They make good container or hanging-basket plants and will grow happily as ground cover in a slightly shady part of the garden.

Varieties

For summer varieties: for the best strawberries throughout the summer, grow 'Darlisette' for an early crop, 'Elsanta' and 'Sonata' for midsummer and 'Malwina' for a late July crop. For plants grown from seed: 'Florian' (F1) is the best large-fruited variety and 'Baron Solemacher' is the best alpine strawberry. Everbearers: we recommend 'Finesse' for the biggest crop in June and September. 'Albion' is good for pots and 'Malling Opal' is a later fruit, yielding through to September.

How to grow

- Plant in well-drained soil in sun, 30cm apart, in rows 60–70cm apart and with the growing tip (crown) just above soil level. Water well until plants are established, then water during dry summer weather, aiming to wet the soil only.
- Remove runners in the first year to encourage plants to establish. Protect fruits from slugs and birds; use straw or mats to keep fruits off the soil.
- Feed with Growmore or Vitax Q4 as per the instructions in spring, and liquid feed with tomato food (or similar) occasionally during summer. Take care not to overfeed, as it reduces crops. Remove dead leaves from everbearers and summer fruiting varieties at the end of the season.
- Verticillium wilt is a soil-borne fungus that makes leaves wilt, turn brown and die. There's no cure, so remove affected plants and don't replant strawberries in the same area.
- To grow plants from seed, scatter thinly over seedling compost in a tray between December and March. Cover lightly with more compost and keep the surface moist. Transplant seedlings individually into small pots. Once they are small rosettes, plant in the ground in a sunny, well-drained spot.

Tip

Grey mould (botrytis) infection often only becomes visible when the fruits ripen, so keep rain off the flowers if possible.

Blueberries

A popular 'superfood' perfect for growing in a pot

Blueberries are available all year round in the supermarket. They're pricey, though, and shipped in from far-flung places, so there's lots of satisfaction to be had from growing your own. They need an acid soil, but anyone can grow them in a patio container using ericaceous compost. They are long-lived plants, so a couple of years invested in growing the right variety will pay dividends for years to come. There are lots of varieties available and most garden centres stock a good selection; they're readily available online, too.

Varieties

We recommend 'Chandler' and 'Toro' for the biggest yield, 'Ozark Blue' as the next most efficient cropper and 'Spartan' as the longest cropper. If you need a compact plant, go for 'Nui'.

How to grow

- Most gardeners will find it easier to grow blueberries in a container filled with ericaceous compost.
- When you buy a plant in a small pot, only repot once the roots fill the pot and then only into a slightly larger container, adding fresh ericaceous compost around the edges.
- Feed with an ericaceous fertiliser and water with rainwater. Keep the compost moist, but not waterlogged.
- The main pest is the blackbird and other fruit-eating birds. Be fastidious in covering your plants with netting to defeat them.
- To prune in the first couple of years, shorten any wayward shoots and aim for a neat, open-centred bush. Thereafter, prune a third of the oldest branches to their base in late winter to give a balance of one-, two- and three-year-old wood.

Tip

Blueberries are self-fertile, so you only need one plant, although having more than one will improve the amount of fruits that set.

Pears

When ripe and dripping with juice, pears are such a treat

Pears are attractive trees, especially when laden with blossom or fruit. They needn't take up much room either, as they're easy to train flat against a wall or fence. Think about buying one in October, because autumn and winter are the best times to plant.

Varieties

If you're looking for a pear that's good for cooking, we recommend 'Improved Fertility'. For tasty crops, choose from 'Louise Bonne of Jersey' and 'Williams' Bon Chrétien'.

How to grow

- Pears need a sunny, sheltered spot and struggle in dry or chalky soil. In the north especially, they're most likely to crop well when trained against a south- or west-facing wall or fence as a fan, cordon or espalier.
- Avoid having a heavy crop, which results in poor-quality fruit and overladen branches, which are liable to break. As soon as the fruits set, thin them so they're 10–15cm apart.
- Pears are best stored loose and left unwrapped. Varieties picked before mid-September don't store well, but later varieties may keep for at least a month in a fridge or cellar, as long as they're picked under-ripe with the stalk intact. 'Conference' may even keep until Christmas.

Go further

Prune pears in the winter – Which? members can see our 'Training apples and pears' factsheet for more information on how to prune your pear tree at **which.co.uk/gardening**.

Tip

If you only have room for one tree, make sure there's a pear tree in a nearby garden and opt for a different variety. Even supposedly self-fertile pears crop best if pollinated by another variety.

Plums

For the ripest, juiciest fruits, we say grow your own

Unlike some fruit, plums don't ripen well once off the tree, so shop-bought ones are unlikely to ever be as sweet or juicy as those eaten fresh when picked at their prime. Late summer is a good time to find out what you're missing if there's a pick-your-own plum grower in your area or, better still, a plum festival. You could then buy a tree of your favourite variety in the autumn or winter – the best time to plant.

Varieties

For the best-tasting plums, we recommend 'Burbank's Tangerine', 'Haganta' and 'Avalon', which is also early to ripen. 'Victoria' is also worth considering as it is very reliable, even though it is also disease-prone.

How to grow

- Plums are grafted onto a rootstock, which determines the vigour and ultimate size of the tree and also how quickly it starts fruiting. When planting, ensure the bump where the trunk joins the rootstock is just above the soil surface.
- Plums need little pruning once established and should never be pruned in winter, as this is when they're most vulnerable to infection by bacterial canker and silver leaf disease (see our free factsheets at **which.co.uk/gardening**). Paint all cuts as soon as they're made with a wound paint.
- To renovate an old tree, remove dead, damaged or badly placed growth. Cut out any twiggy leafless growth from the centre and any vertical branches. Pull off any shoots that have sprouted at the base.

Tip

Plums are easy to grow in a sunny, sheltered spot, as long as your soil isn't dry and chalky.

> If you are netting a tree to protect the fruit from birds, ensure it is taut so they are less likely to become entangled

Basil

If you like Mediterranean cuisine, then basil is a must

Nothing conjures up warm Mediterranean summers more than the taste and aroma of basil. It is an ideal companion for tomatoes, both on your plate and in the garden (it will grow under tomato plants), and looks and smells great in a patio pot. There are two main types, with either large soft leaves or small leaves on neat bushes. There are also purple-leafed types, which are especially attractive in patio displays. Now, breeders are starting to produce new varieties with better colours and habits, while retaining that characteristic aroma.

Varieties

We recommend 'Aristotle' for a neat, small-leafed bush and 'Puck', with its large leaves, ideal for tearing and scattering over a pizza or pasta dish.

How to grow

- You can start sowing basil towards the end of March in a greenhouse or on a sunny windowsill. Basil is very sensitive to cold and will blacken at the slightest hint of frost, so make sure you keep your early sowings protected from the cold.
- Once the young plants are about 15cm tall, remove the shoot tip to encourage more leafy growth and a bushier plant.
- Pinch out flower buds regularly and pick young shoots from the top of the plant to encourage side shoots. After picking your basil heavily, you can give the plant a little liquid feed.
- In June, sow another batch of basil outside. Move indoor plants outside to the patio.
- Make a final sowing in August to give you fresh basil for cooking into the autumn.

Coriander

A useful herb with a truly distinctive taste

If you use coriander a lot, it makes sense to grow your own. The good news is, it's easy. If you grow coriander from the culinary seeds sold in supermarkets, it's likely to bolt (produce flowers) before you've harvested much leaf. Instead, named varieties, bred for leaf rather than seed production, are a better bet. Bolting can still be a problem with these, but several claim better resistance to it. Some even have unusual feathery leaves.

Varieties

We recommend 'Calypso', which is less likely to bolt than other varieties. For the best taste, choose 'Lemon Coriander'.

How to grow

- Coriander doesn't like being moved, so it's best sown where you want it to grow, either in the ground or in large pots. Sow in late spring or early summer.
- Coriander is annoyingly quick to flower and sets seed before it has produced much leaf, so it's best to sow little and often. Watch out for fine, feathery leaves – a sure sign that the plants are about to flower.
- Well-drained soil in a sunny spot is essential. If you're growing it indoors on a windowsill, give it plenty of light and don't overwater.
- Keep picking mature leaves as and when you need them. Regular cropping should delay flowering. Once the plants do flower, allow them to set seed. The seed is ripe when it stops smelling unpleasant. Collect it and use in cooking, setting some aside to sow for another crop.

Tip

For a supply of coriander during the autumn and winter, sow seeds in pots in August and keep on the windowsill.

> For the best tasting plants, choose 'Lemon Coriander'

Rosemary and mint

Home-grown herbs fresh from a patio pot

Rosemary

Rosemary is widely available as an established plant in garden centres for planting in spring. For more plants, take cuttings from young shoots in spring or summer. The plant can also be used as a low hedge.

How to grow

- Rosemary is slightly tender and needs a sunny, sheltered position in well-drained soil; it does well in chalky soils.
- If growing it in a container, add some grit to the compost to aid drainage and don't overwater. After flowering in March, trim into shape and feed.
- You can pick leaves from this evergreen all year round. It's a good idea to dry some leaves at the end of summer if you want to use lots of rosemary over the winter, or add a sprig to olive oil for salad dressings.

Mint

Mint grown from seed will rarely be the same as the parent plant, so the only way to get your favourite mint is to buy established plants – garden centres will have a good supply in spring.

How to grow

- Mint prefers moist soil and light sun to shade. Keep it well watered and remove the flowers to stop it self-seeding. Feed with a liquid fertiliser. Pick fresh mint leaves throughout the growing season. Pick leaves before flowering and freeze them, either whole or chopped, in airtight containers.

Rosemary and mint varieties

- **Rosemary** We recommend the common rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis), the hardiest form and most used in cooking. 'Miss Jessopp's Upright' is a more vigorous and upright variety and makes a good focal point in a herb bed.
- **Mint** Spearmint (Mentha spicata) is the familiar mint with long, pointed leaves and a refreshing flavour. For food, teas and salads, choose 'Moroccan' and 'Tashkent' mints. 'Apple' mint has a mild mint flavour and apple-scented, woolly leaves. 'Pineapple' mint has pretty, cream-streaked leaves and can also be used in cooking.

Tip

All mints are invasive to some degree, spreading via underground stems. This makes them ideal for growing in containers. Divide every two to three years in spring to keep them vigorous.

Caring for your crops

You've planted your crops – now you need to look after them. Read our tips on watering, feeding and pest control

The pleasure of growing your own vegetables, fruit and herbs can be short-lived if pests and diseases get to your crops first. Take action – ideally before they strike. Many pesticides and fungicides are being withdrawn from the market, and often people prefer not to spray their crops, but there are chemical-free ways of controlling pests and diseases.

- Healthy soil produces healthy plants more able to withstand pest and disease attacks. All soils benefit from the addition of 'organic matter', such as home-made garden compost or well-rotted manure. Organic matter improves the structure of soils that are waterlogged, compacted or too free draining. It also feeds the hidden army of creatures and organisms that all contribute to the general health and fertility of the soil. Recycle as much organic matter as you can from your own garden and kitchen with a compost bin or heap.
- Fine netting such as Enviromesh will protect your plants and crops from flying insects such as aphids. Drape it over hoops of stiff wire so that crops have enough room to grow. It's essential to do this as soon as you plant out your crops, rather than wait until you spot a pest, otherwise it will be too late!
- Time sowings and plantings to miss vulnerable periods. For example, grow 'early' potatoes to avoid blight.

- Pick off pests such as slugs, snails and caterpillars by hand. Make sure you squash any aphids.
- Encourage insect predators such as ladybirds, lacewings, hoverflies and birds.
- Try using biological controls (millions of tiny predators that attack specific pests). We've had success with Nemaslug, which is used to control slugs. See: **nemasysinfo.com**.

Tip

To stop slugs and snails attacking veg in pots, spray the pot rim with WD-40.

> Encourage insect predators such as ladybirds, lacewings, hoverflies and birds

Maintenance tips

Watering

Watering your crops is essential in hot weather. If time or water is short, prioritise anything newly planted. You should also prioritise early potatoes, lettuce, radishes, beans and peas, soft fruit that's developing berries, beans that are developing pods, and tomatoes.

Also prioritise any crops that are growing in pots. Many crops, once established, don't need much watering – these include beetroot, garlic, onions, pumpkins, rhubarb, pears and plums.

To get the best possible harvest from any soft fruit, you need to ensure that the plant is supplied with adequate water at all times.

An erratic supply of moisture to your crops will not only be likely to reduce them, but will also encourage the development of tougher skins. These tough skins may then, in turn, be prone to splitting when water suddenly becomes available again.

All this watering need not mean using more mains water. Fix a diverter to the downpipe from your bath or shower for a good, regular supply. Replenish any mulches if necessary (see page 4) at any stage during the warmer summer months.

Weeding

Weeds compete with your veg for moisture and nutrients, so you need to be constantly on top of them. Some weeds can also harbour pests that then move on to your crops.

Tackling a large, neglected plot full of perennial weeds is very hard work, so you might want to use a weedkiller to get a head start, even if you plan to grow vegetables organically.

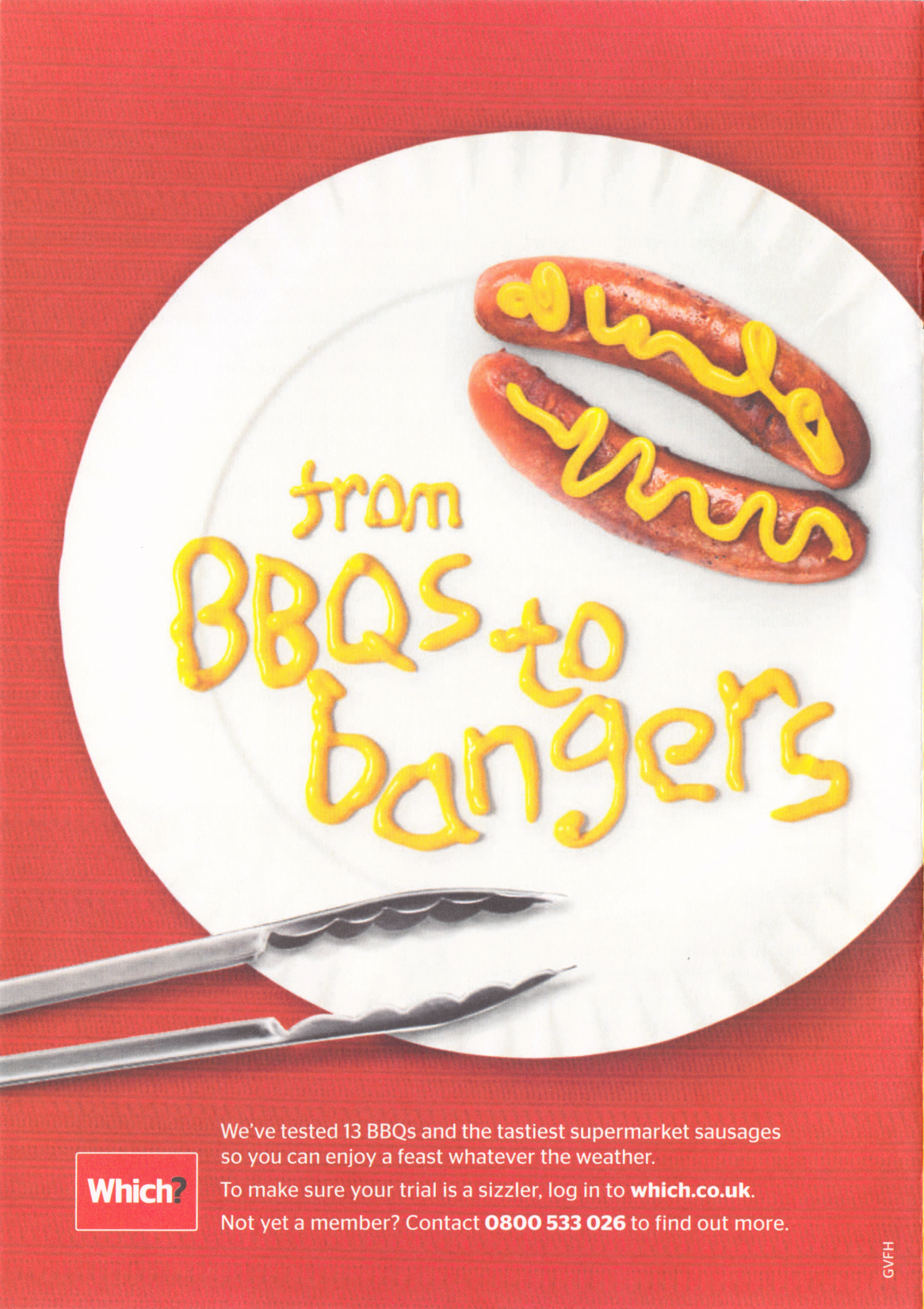
Once the cultivated ground is more or less weed-free, it can be kept that way without using any chemicals at all. Hoeing is an excellent way of getting rid of annual weeds – pick a dry, sunny day to do this. Perennial weeds need to be pulled or dug up (be sure to pull up all of the roots, otherwise they'll regrow).

You could add a mulch (a layer placed on top of the soil) to keep weeds down. Mulches include garden compost, well-rotted farmyard manure, composted green waste or woven polypropylene. Mulches also have the added benefit of keeping moisture locked in the soil.

Preserve your crops

Don't forget that any excess fruit crops can be stored. For most of us, freezing is the easiest and quickest option. In the summer, cut the last of the rhubarb into chunks and save the misshapen strawberries for making coulis or jam later in the year.

You can also open freeze blueberries (all this means is spacing the fruits on a tray so that no two fruits touch), and then scoop up the berries into plastic bags and store them in the freezer until you are ready to use them.



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